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Article

Recentralising Political Power Through Decentralised Environmental Governance: A Case from Mexico's Early REDD+ Program

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Abstract

The decentralisation of environmental governance is often associated with the interests of political parties and the fight for political power. In Mexico, constitutional reforms sought to provide more autonomy to local municipal governments, but until now, have had paradoxical effects. Now, in the face of international commitments like REDD+, Mexico is promoting the formation of decentralised parastatal organisations called *Inter-municipal Juntas*, to oversee broadly-defined environmental conservation activities at the local scale. Although the *Juntas* are proposed to be a model of decentralised environmental governance, this article draws upon a case study of one such *Junta* in the state of Jalisco to demonstrate that in reality, they merely serve to re-centralise political power at the local scale. Utilising the literature on decentralised environmental governance as well as the literature on democracy, decentralisation, and state power in Mexico, this article illustrates how the economic and political marginalisation of the municipalities in the region combined with the power of the political parties, particularly the PRI, undermine the process of decentralisation, and consequently the democratisation of environmental governance in Mexico. Such deficiencies have implications not only for environmental governance in Mexico but also for the broader process of democracy in Mexico.

Keywords: Environmental governance, decentralisation, marginalisation, Mexico, democracy, centralisation, scale, REDD+

INTRODUCTION

One of the prominent characteristics of neoliberal reforms throughout Latin America has been, in part, to transfer and locate critical state functions from a centrist form of governance to more localised governance. Mexico, in particular, was considered to be one of the most centralised states in the region, having had one-party control of the central state from 1929-2000. During this time, often referred to as the "perfect dictatorship", highly centralised formal institutions were dependent upon a deeply decentralised system of clientelism and patronage, which served to reinforce the formal power of the state and thus, the ruling party. Supporters of decentralisation argued that it had the potential to strengthen democratic governance by making elected officials more accountable and responsible to citizens. However, efforts to decentralise the Mexican state have had paradoxical results. Scholars of deliberative democracy and social capital suggest that such varied outcomes can be linked to the role of civil society groups, since areas where social-movement organisations create linkages between citizens and the state are more likely to facilitate democratic institutions than in places where these links are more fragile or non-existent (Foley and Edwards 1996).

In the face of international commitments such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), Mexico is promoting decentralised environmental governance in the form of decentralised public organisations called Inter-municipal *Juntas*. These *Juntas* serve as a

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hybrid form of environmental governance that combines governmental, non-governmental, and civil society elements. *Juntas* are designed as a mechanism to create collaboration between various actors within regions that have been designated as an "early REDD+ action area", or regions where REDD+ pilot projects are taking place. Moreover, they are proposed to be a replicable model of decentralised environmental governance that facilitate integrated, sustainable development; specifically for the purpose of implementing REDD+ locally. However, in this paper, I argue that in reality, without a strong civil society presence, they run the risk of merely providing a mechanism to re-scale political power to the municipalities, which is the local form of government in Mexico. To make this argument, I draw on a case study of the Inter-municipal Junta of the Sierra Occidental (JISOC) in the state of Jalisco, Mexico.

By taking a closer look at the experience of JISOC, the study demonstrates how the combined economic marginalisation of the municipalities in the Sierra Occidental, the absence of civil society participation within the organisation, and the power of the political parties; combine to undermine decentralisation, and consequently the democratisation of environmental governance in Mexico. In tracing the origins of the *Juntas* and the process of decentralising environmental governance in Mexico, the study also illustrates how the *Juntas* are actually designed to reduce public participation, which merely serves to reinforce the power of the political parties, particularly the Institutional Revolutionary Party (or PRI for its Spanish acronym). In many ways, the process of re-centralising power into the hands of the dominant political party reflects the larger challenges to democracy Mexico currently faces. Such deficiencies have implications not only for environmental governance in Mexico but also for the broader process of democratising the political process in Mexico.

FRAMEWORK

The Politics of Scale and Decentralisation

The environmental governance literature tends to conceive scale as nested hierarchical 'levels' through which the exercise of power and decision-making moves up or down the vertical hierarchy. However, a second dimension conceives of scale as a "flat" process whereby decision-making is scaled out across social groups or non-state actors (Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Cohen and McCarthy 2014). In the case I present, the rescaling of state power is intimately related to the scaling of environmental governance *down* from a central authority to the municipality and also *out* to other state and non-state actors.

Rescaling and decentralising environmental governance also assume two forms. Democratic decentralisation, which is often considered to provide the greatest benefits, occurs when local authorities are downwardly accountable to their citizenry, but is also often poorly implemented (Ribot 2002; Ribot et al. 2006; Cheema and Rondonelli 2007). In contrast, administrative decentralisation, or deconcentration, occurs when power is devolved from central ministries to their local offices, and responsibility and authority are rescaled out to parastatal or semi-autonomous agents of the state (Cheema and Rondonelli 2007; Larson and Soto 2008). Ribot et al. (2006) also consider deconcentration to occur when local authorities are made accountable to upper-level superiors through elections and funding arrangements. This upward accountability characteristic of deconcentration also lends itself to elite capture, which occurs when local governments are undermined by the inability to raise the resources necessary to adequately govern. Ribot (2004) argues that the prevalence of elite capture reinforces the need for multiple accountability mechanisms and well-structured accountability relations, such as the balance of power, third-party monitoring, transparency, and increased citizen participation. There must also be a willingness and ability on the part of government officials to share power, authority, and financial resources (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007); a willingness lacking in the current case, as demonstrated in this study.

Decentralising REDD+ in Latin America

The challenges to reconciling incoherent land-use policy, ensuring accountability, and balancing the needs of diverse stakeholders across scales are significant concerns for implementing and decentralising REDD+throughout Latin America (e.g. Larson and Petkova 2011;Nasi et al. 2011; Rantala et al. 2014; Bastos Lima et al. 2017). Yet, citizen involvement can be an important part of ensuring that REDD+ is transparent and locally accountable. As Nasi et al. (2011) argue, a stronger civil society in Latin America than in other regions of the world constitutes an important actor in negotiating changes in forests and environmental policies. However, to date, citizen participation in REDD+ has been limited to public consultation after implementation has already begun and rarely includes dialogue on policies (Larson and Petkova 2011). In the case of Mexico, several grassroots groups were involved in the national strategy design, however, significant disagreement led to the retreat of some of these groups from the process (Rantala et al. 2014). In addition, public consultations, for example with women's groups, were seen to be public relations events that did not adequately represent the interests of very diverse groups of people across a large territory (Bee 2017).

Larson and Petkova (2011) suggest three reasons why citizen participation is so important for REDD+: 1) citizens provide valuable input into policies and strategies; 2) citizens living in or near forests are important stakeholders in the design of national strategies and local projects; 3) an equally important aspect of citizen participation is their role in holding both national and subnational governments accountable. Lastly, this accountability can also provide a counterweight to vested interest and thus, reduce the potential for elite capture and corruption within the REDD+ implementation process.

Decentralising Environmental Governance in Mexico

In the case of Mexico, as in many other parts of the world, the governance of natural resources and the processes of sustainable development is officially part of the process of decentralisation. In the forestry sector, Mexico is widely cited as having a well-established form of democratic decentralisation that supports community forestry (Klooster 2003). Although it is important to note that the majority of documented successes of community forestry come from southern Mexico (Bray et al. 2006;Wilshusen 2009; Cronkleton et al. 2011).

In 1982, as part of the wave of neoliberal and decentralisation reforms in the country, communities were given the right to manage their own forests, which had previously been managed by the central government. In 2001, the federal government established the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR for its Spanish acronym), a decentralised public organisation tasked with administering forestry programs throughout Mexico. CONAFOR's focus was mainly on administering timber extraction programs but has also recently become responsible for forest conservation programs as well. While community forestry groups still have a great deal of autonomy in the management of their resources, the federal government, through CONAFOR, still controls the allocation of permits and forestry regulation (Hébert and Rosen 2007).

Also during the 1980s and 90s, Mexican municipalities became a central tool in the process of democratisation and decentralisation of the state, and as a means to conserve the political power of the dominant party in Mexico: the PRI (Arcudia Hernandez 2012). Many municipal governments, particularly those in rural areas, remain dependent upon funding transfers from state and federal governments (Díaz Cayeros and Silva Castañeda 2004; Selee 2011). For these municipalities, it's easier to look to state and federal sources of funding than to implement politically unpopular means of increasing tax revenue (Grindle 2007). As a result, municipalities have structures for representation that remain embedded in the clientelism of the former PRI regime (Gindle 2007; Selee 2011).

Inadequate municipal budgets and a lack of institutional human resources are often also a central concern for effective decentralisation of power and ineffective environmental management (Larson 2002; Robles de Benito et al. 2008). As González (2012) argues, the weakness of municipal governments, particularly in rural areas, is one of the principal obstacles to sustainable development in Mexico. Limitations due to weak institutional and legal frameworks, scarce economic resources, the absence of collaboration between municipalities to address shared environmental problems, and the excessive political control of interest groups like political parties place municipal authorities in a position of permanent temptation to yield to corruption (González 2012).

For this reason, inter-municipal cooperation helps strengthen municipal economies and broaden the scale of environmental management, which the municipality would not be able to cope with on their own (Arellano and Rivera 2011). This cooperation also helps to abate the limited technical capabilities that plague municipal governments and the insufficiency of resources, which can lead to corruption (Arellano and Rivera 2011). Such inter-municipal cooperation has become a key organising feature of implementing REDD+ in Mexico, in the form of Inter-municipal *Juntas*.

The structure and function of the *Juntas* are modelled after the first inter-municipal organisation to manage environmental issues within a threatened watershed in the state of Jalisco: the Inter-municipal Junta of the Ayuquila River (JIRA). JIRA is hailed as a model of both decentralised environmental governance and an inter-municipal alliance between different actors to address regional environmental problems (León et al. 2008, Arellano and Rivera 2011; González 2012). However, JIRA's creation involved a process directed by from local needs, in response to an environmental crisis that was deemed important both by local citizens and municipal administrations (Montero et al. 2006). Moreover, it also has a very active and involved citizen participation component.

On the other hand, the process of creating *Juntas* in other regions is both externally driven by the desire of the federal government participating in the international process of REDD+, and assumes that there is local desire and capacity to build more democratic mechanisms into integrated environmental management (Libert Amico and Trench 2016). So although there is an explicit desire for democratic, civil society participation in the founding of such *Juntas* in Mexico; the reproduction of clientelism, shifting political priorities, and the strong influence of authoritarian centralism present significant obstacles to this participation locally (Rantala et al. 2014; Libert Amico and Trench 2016). I will show in the case of JISOC, an environment controlled by political parties and a lack of initiative to address environmental issues creates turmoil within the first year of its operation. Moreover, the weak institutional and legal framework for the *Junta*, combined with scarce economic resources within the municipalities create an additional challenge to the success of the model.

METHODS

The case study I present is grounded in a small ethnographic study conducted over a period of five months in 2013. Data collection included participant observation, document analysis, and interviews with JISOC staff and volunteers during this time. Participant observation included spending time at the JISOC offices and accompanying JISOC staff to meetings, community visits, and other work, to get a better grasp of JISOC's role in implementing the newly established REDD+ governance strategy in the early action, or pilot area. Participant observation allows the researcher to gather details that might otherwise be missed in a less intimate setting. Document analysis included a review of JISOC, CONAFOR, and other policy and funding documents and public information. Additionally, I conducted interviews with the five JISOC staff and volunteers about their various roles, the challenges they faced, and how they interpreted the events of the first year. I

also conducted one interview with a board member and two interviews with staff from the Latin American Investment Fund (LAIF), who both provided funding and technical assistance to JISOC. These interviews focussed on the relationship between the board, LAIF, and JISOC.

STUDY SITE

The Inter-municipal Junta of the Sierra Occidental and the Coast (JISOC) is a decentralised parastatal organisation tasked with addressing environmental issues in seven municipalities: Atenguillo, Cabo Corrientes, Guachinango, Mixtlán, Mascota, Talpa de Allende and San Sebastian del Oeste. In general terms, it is well known that the region is economically marginalised. As a reflection of this, five of the seven municipalities that comprise JISOC are entirely rural or have no town with more than 5000 inhabitants in the entire municipality (CONAPO 2013). Four of the seven municipalities have a "very high" degree of marginalisation[1], one is classified as "high", and the remaining two are classified as having a "medium" degree of marginalisation (CONAPO 2013). Additionally, the region has a notable absence of civil society groups. It's also important to note that from 2012-2015, all but two of the municipalities had PRI administrations: Atenguillo and Mascota.

JISOC was founded in 2012 as part of the project "REDD+ early action in priority watersheds", which is financed by the French Development Agency (ADF), the Spanish International Cooperation for Development Agency (AECID), and the Latin American Investment Facility (LAIF) of the European Union. The REDD+ early action projects were established as part of Mexico's National Strategy to comply with UNFCCC requirements. These non-carbon projects were intended to address deforestation and forest degradation, build the capacities of rural communities, improve the quality of life of rural residents, and promote sustainable development (CONAFOR 2011; CONAFOR 2012a; CONAFOR 2013). Specific conservation activities included a reconfiguration of existing forest conservation programs, which includes among other things, the national Payment for Ecosystem Services program that would continue to be managed by CONAFOR. A more general purpose of the early REDD+ project included the formation of six inter-municipal agencies in the states of Quinta Roo, Campeche, Yucatán and Jalisco "with the goal of reproducing ***with exactitude*** the JIRA model" (Banco Mundial 2012: 89, emphasis added). So although the Juntas were created because of REDD+ activities, the hope was that they would become permanent fixtures in regional environmental governance.According to the loan terms from the World Bank, which provided financing for several different early REDD+ activities, a stated medium-term goal of the project includes the desire that the Inter-municipal *Juntas* will help to maintain a more inclusive, locally designed REDD+ strategy and will be key actors in promoting civil society's participation in policy-making and achieving the benefits expected from the program (Banco Mundial 2012).

However, these Juntas and the funding that supported them did not actually oversee any of the forest conservation programs, which are managed by the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR). Instead, as a decentralised public organisation, the Junta's main mission is to provide technical support to the member municipalities for the elaboration, management, and implementation of projects and programs related to the environment and management of natural resources in their territories (JISOC 2012). These activities could include any environmental activity identified by the member municipalities as necessary and relevant to their situation. To carry out this mission, JISOC has an annual budget of 2 million pesos[2], provided by external funding and funneled through the state government. Notably, this budget is equivalent to the annual operating budget of four of the seven municipalities that JISOC serves (Secretaría General 2017).

To complete its objectives, JISOC maintains a Board of Directors that is empowered to set the yearly Operating Plan. This Board comprises 12 voting members, including the presidents of the seven municipalities, two regional representatives from federal agencies: the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) and the National Protected Areas Commission(CONANP), two state agencies: the Secretary of Environment and Territorial Development (SEMADET) and the Secretary of Rural Development (SEDER), and the University of Guadalajara (Table 1). This Board also has a president who rotates every six months and can only be occupied by one of the municipal presidents. The composition and role of this Board is extremely important in the operation of JISOC as this is the main decision-making body of JISOC that decides how and where the budget will be spent and coordinating the hiring and evaluation of the Director. Moreover, because the municipalities make up slightly less than two-thirds of the voting members, it grants local governments a great deal of power over the organisation and meets the desired element of decentralising environmental governance to local officials.

Table 1
JISOC Board of Directors

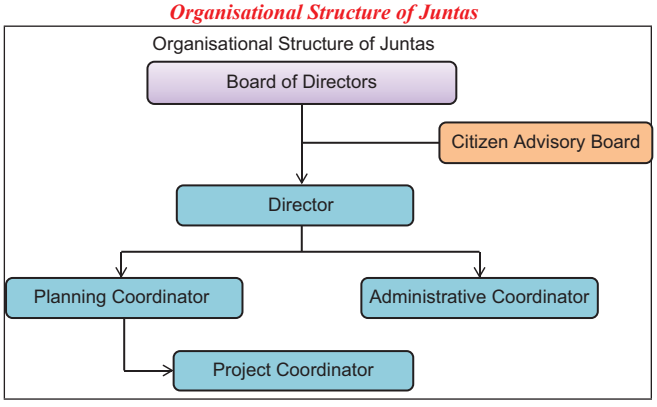
Sector	Scale	Name
Government	Federal	National Protected Areas Commission (CONANP)
	State	Secretary of Rural Development (SEDER) Secretary of Environment and Territorial Development (SEMADET) National Forestry Commission, State Dependency (CONAFOR-JALISCO)
	Municipal	Atenguillo, Cabo Corrientes, Guachinango, Mascota, Mixtlán, San Sebastián del Oeste, y Talpa de Allende
Social	Universities	Coastal University Center, University of Guadalajara (CUC-UDG)
	Local	Citizen Council-does not yet exist

JISOC has a staff of four to carry out its objectives. These positions include a Director, an Administrator, a Planning Coordinator, and a Project Manager who works under the Planning Coordinator (Table 2). The Planning Coordinator and Project Manager spend the greatest amount of time meeting with local communities and implementing JISOC's various projects and plans. Given the size of the territory and the remoteness of many of the areas, the staff of JISOC stays incredibly busy.

During the first couple years, in addition to receiving funding, JISOC also received technical assistance from LAIF through a staff of three, based in Guadalajara. Some of LAIF's strategic goals included establishing and supporting the development of the *Juntas*, developing technical capacities for the implementation of sustainable rural development and community forest management activities to improve the provision and quality of environmental services, encouraging the creation of financing mechanisms for REDD+ activities, and promoting citizen participation mechanisms and communication for regional management in the local REDD+ strategy (Colmenares 2013). By the end of 2013, LAIF had already established another *Junta* and was in the process of establishing two more in Jalisco as well as two more in the Yucatan Peninsula, and one in Chiapas (FCPF 2013).

Lastly, one of the most important aspects of the structure of every *Junta* is the Citizen Council, which is established in the second year of existence according to the legal framework. The Citizen Council incorporates local participation, by bringing together representatives of the scientific community, ordinary citizens of the municipalities, private organisations, non-governmental organisations, and public organisations working in the territory of the *Junta* to advise the Board of directors regarding the projects and programs to be carried out by the *Junta* (JISOC 2012). Specifically, this includes up to three people from each municipality that comprise the *Junta*, who will be nominated by members of the Board of Directors and will meet at least twice a year (JISOC 2012). The specific operational rules of the Consejo will be designed and decided upon by the Consejo members and submitted to the Board of Directors for approval. According to JISOC's legal framework, the Citizen council is responsible for advising the Administrative Board with respect to the actions, research, projects, and programs that correspond to what the *Junta* is carrying out, which included among other things, the ability to evaluate the expenses of the *Junta*.

Table 2
Organisational Structure of Juntas



This Council has been a key component of the success of the first *Junta,* JIRA. Firstly, the participation of the Citizen Council has generateda strong social demand for the municipalities to address the complex environmental problems that exist within their own municipalities (Leon et al. 2008). But also key in the context of Mexico and the decentralisation of environmental governance, the Council has enabled JIRA to overcome party politics and administrative changes that exist every election cycle (Arellano and Rivera 2011; González 2012). As such, it acts as a hinge between the Board, the JISOC staff, and local citizens, and provides a balance of power to the governing of the *Juntas* and their activities. Furthermore, the council also represents an added step in the process of decentralising environmental governance by closing the gap even further between government agencies (in this case municipalities) and the citizens of the region.

RESULTS

"…It was all about politics."

I arrived to work alongside and observe JISOC in May of 2013, one month shy of its first-year anniversary. When I first walked through the doors of the organisation, it was a Wednesday evening and the staff had set up a table with coffee and cookies in preparation for a visit from the staff of LAIF (who were both partially funding JISOC and carrying out local projects in the region), myself, and three consultants hired by the LAIF project to help carry out an analysis of local community-basedforest monitoring and reporting activities carried out in local forest communities as part of early REDD+ activities. JISOC's role was to act as a facilitator between the local communities, LAIF, and the municipalities. I spent the next five days accompanying the LAIF team, the consultants, and JISOC's Planning Coordinator, Edmundo[3], into communities to follow-up on the community-based forest monitoring projects, which were established to build the capacities of local communities to measure and verify deforestation within their territories.

The trip involved visiting three communities, all of which the Planning Coordinator had scheduled with the local project members. Only in one of the communities, was it necessary to visit with the Municipal President first, to give them an update about the project. This particular president, Yesenia, was also the president of the Board of Directors and she was not currently a fan of the work of JISOC, Edmundo would later inform me. After we arrived at the Town Hall, we were kept waiting for about an hour, then we were met, not by the municipal president, but by one of the President's staff. After the encounter and our trip to the community, Edmundo expressed his disappointment that the president did not meet with us. "I spent so much time, setting up this meeting at a time that works for her. Then she keeps us waiting for an hour

and can't even meet with us, she sends the Secretary General. I didn't even want to meet with her but Carmen (The director of JISOC) insisted so that we could try to maintain good relations" (field notes). When I asked Edmundo why it was important to maintain good relations, he explained that this particular municipal president, as the president of the Board of Directors, holds a lot of power over the organisation and the Board and that JISOC staff was not in a position to upset her in any way. Yesenia had publicly expressed discontent at previous meetings and with the one-year anniversary of the organisation around the corner,the JISOC director did not want to rock the boat.

During JISOC's first year, the LAIF staff and a temporary municipal committee, instead of the Board of Directors, hired JISOC's first Director, Carmen. This was done in order to jump-start the program, and because the Board was not fully developed until April the following year. It was also done this way because JISOC's first year coincided with a monumental national election and with corresponding local elections in which the PRI, who had previously ruled Mexico for 71 years, sought to regain power at all levels of government. As it happened one month after Carmen was hired, the PRI lost the presidency but won the governorship of the state of Jalisco. New municipal presidents were elected in all seven of JISOC's municipalities, and all but two were PRI party members. Now, the PRI party had an unprecedented amount of political capital in all three levels of government, which as I will demonstrate, significantly impacted the ability of JISOC to function properly.

By the time JISOC was on my radar, they had begun organising meetings to review the first year's activities, to set an Operating Plan for the year ahead, and to complete JISOC's decentralised structure by formalising the existence of a Citizen Council. This operating plan was decided annually by the Board of Directors, with the cooperation from JISOC and LAIF staff, to set the specific programs and planning for the year, to accomplish the strategic action plan set forth by the organisation, and modelled after the example from JIRA. The legal framework for the Juntas mandated that a yearly Operating Plan is set by the board, with an eye towards environmental conservation and protection, but there was a great deal of flexibility with regards to the goals and outcomes that could be set each year. As a consequence, these actions extended beyond the goals of REDD+ to include broad environmental management goals such as managing urban waste, promoting sustainable tourism, promoting regional environmental planning, outreach and education, and sustainable resource use (JISOC n.d.). For example, during the first year, most of JISOC's time was spent doing environmental outreach and education to local communities and implementing a plan in each municipality to establish sites for recycling and/or properly disposing of agrochemical packaging that would not harm the environment. The results of these activities not only promoted sound environmental management practices but also provided an opportunity for JISOC staff to strengthen their relationships with local communities.

In addition to working in communities, both the JISOC director and LAIF staff spent a great deal of time working with the municipal presidents and their staff to ensure that the needs of their municipalities were being addressed and that infact, each municipal president understood the need for the *Junta*. As one LAIF staff member explained it to me, "The Junta is part of the municipalities, and they are the most important element in this work. If the municipalities don't believe in it, it doesn't work. JISOC doesn't exist to replace the work of the municipalities, but rather to enhance it, to add to it, to make it better."

JISOC staff also explained that one of the challenges during the first year was overcoming perceived thematic "turf" on the part of the state agencies that made-up part of the Board, particularly with regards to forestry management issues. According to the director, Carmen:

> "At first, the biggest difficulty was really the state agencies (SEMADET, CONAFOR, etc.). That's to say that the moment that JISOC began participating in regional committees about forest fires or timber extraction, the committee members that already existed seemed jealous or had a lack of willingness or add another organisation into the mix. They would say, "wait, this is my topic, don't touch it." They seemed to want to control and protect their own territories from outsiders. And we were seen as outsiders. We estimated that in many of these topics there was corruption and that at the time another institution wanted to also address the same issue, for example in the case of forest fires, was key or rather very obvious that the forest and that dependencies had certain strategies of control and corruption in the territory. I do not just refer to money, I mean acts of power" (interview, 2013).

Both state and federal agencies were famous for making massive personnel changes when new political parties were elected either to the presidency of the republic (in the case of federal agencies) or to the governorship, as was the case with state agencies. The year prior to my arrival, I was told by several members of state and federal agencies that following the 2012 election, many people who were seen to be loyal to the previous political party lost their jobs in favor of new personnel who were seen to have loyalty to the new party in power: the PRI. As a staff member of the national CONAFOR office explained to me, "Every time the political party changes, they change everything: from staff and logos to the colour of t-shirts that staff wear. They even changed the color of the chairs in the meeting rooms so that they were red (the color of the PRI)!" (interview, 2013). Despite twelve years having passed since the PRI first lost its monopoly on political power in Mexico, politics and the functioning of local, state and federal agencies were still very much embedded in political patronage. So individuals set on keeping their jobs through the next transition tended to tow the party line and protect their territory fiercely.

After some time, Carmen mentioned that it became apparent that even more challenging than building legitimacy with

state agencies, was building legitimacy with the municipal governments themselves. Again, Carmen explains the moment when she felt that the municipalities had no intention of contributing to the success of the organisation:

> "…the moment we began to complete the first year of activities, we began to invite many authorities, and we started to organise a great event that I think politically was not strategic because of the presidents. In particular, the president (of the Board, Yesenia) could "feel footsteps on the political roof" (she felt uncomfortable). So we had to cancel the event to celebrate the anniversary of the first year of JISOC. We already had a list of guests including federal and state deputies, representatives of different local groups, mayors, key people who could help us continue our work but also have political weight. We started organising in April (2013) for an event in June and from this moment we started having more difficulties. This was for me a sign, like a zeal ... a sign of control. She (Yesenia) told me it was cancelled. This to me was a very key sign that it was all about politics, not about the actual work I was doing."

Yesenia had been elected to municipal president in 2012 and was elected to be the Board president in April of 2013. By mid-May, Carmen and Yesenia attended a forum in Guadalajara together, with other members of the federal and state government, including federal and state congressional representatives regarding the operation of the *Juntas*, including its funding. Although I was unable to attend, Carmen discussed the forum with her staff and myself when she returned that evening. "I think she feels like JISOC has more political clout than she does as a municipal president and she doesn't like it one bit. All she was worried about were the funds. That's all she asked about." When we asked her to elaborate a little bit, Carmen told us, "Environmental agendas are set at the federal level. And the funds for this project that are designated for SEMADET, are labeled so by congressional approval. She wants to bypass JISOC and have the funds arrive into each municipality directly. Two of the congressmen that were present at the forum were PRIistas (belonging to the PRI party), so she argued as a PRIista herself, that as the Board president, she should be able to administer the funds herself." The very next day, Yesenia informed Carmen that the plans to celebrate JISOC's first year were to be canceled. Although Carmen had regular meetings with the municipal president's prior to Yesenia's election, and the staff interacted almost weekly with other members of the municipal governments—from ecology directors to rural development directors—they perceived an uphill climb towards convincing the municipal presidents that the environment mattered and that JISOC could help address these problems.

The challenges JISOC encountered in their first year, particularly with regards to issues of political "turf", concerns over funding flows, and Yesenia's plea as a "PRIista" can be seen as a characteristic of what Ribot et al. (2006) refer to as deconcentration, whereby local authorities are made accountable to upper-level superiors through elections and funding arrangements. Deconcentration also lends itself to elite capture when local governments, in this case, the municipalities, are undermined by the inability to raise the resources necessary to adequately govern. Combating and preventing elite capture, therefore, requires multiple accountability mechanisms such as transparency and increased citizen participation, as they can hold governments accountable and thus reduce the possibility of elite capture and corruption (Ribot 2004, Larson and Petkova 2011).

"It's better if we keep this money ourselves"

The difficulty with the municipalities became most apparent during the bi-annual board meeting in June, during which the Board of Directors, along with the LAIF team, met to discuss the progress of the organisation and the priorities of the municipality. At the very beginning of the meeting, after Carmen thanked everyone for coming and reminded everyone that the agenda for the day was to establish the Operating Plan for the coming year, the president of Mascota municipality asked if he could say a few words. "Thank you all for coming today. As we discuss the Operating Plan for the coming year, I have several doubts. It seems to me that the Operating Plan has so far been approved by JISOC, and not by the municipalities. I am doubtful that many of the tasks to accomplish are even relevant for my municipality. I continue to struggle to understand the utility of JISOC and I hope that we are able to develop trust amongst ourselves and a plan that finally reflects our needs." In response, the representative from the University also stood to explain that JISOC is not separate from the municipalities, but indeed part of it. He also insisted that the environment was an important element for each municipality to address and maintain and that it was JISOC's mandate, at the behest of the municipalities, to carry out the work of improving environmental conditions throughout the region. After a lengthy, wordy speech by the University representative, the group set out breaking down each of the Operating Plan's six tasks to accomplish and reflected on the past year's successes, suggested modifications, and in some cases, debated their utility.

In the end, the Operating Plan for the upcoming year remained almost identical to the previous year's, with one exception: now a Citizen Council would be formalised. Despite the disagreements between municipalities, this was an important operational goal that JISOC staff was adamant about including. Part of their enthusiasm was due to the fact that the legal framework of the *Juntas* required the creation of a Citizen Council. But more importantly, considering the amount of time JISOC staff had spent over the past year doing outreach and education activities in local communities, they felt strongly that a Citizen Council would help shift political power away from the municipalities, and toward civil society. According to the original rules of JISOC, the Citizen Council was to include at least 3 citizens from each municipality, or 21 members in total. The written agreement of establishing this council in the coming year was a major victory for JISOC.

However, in light of this small victory, the frustrations of the municipal presidents became ever more clear. When I discussed the meeting with JISOC staff, and about their growing concern about the municipalities as a barrier to their work, Edmundo explained it to me thusly: "The topic of the environment is not really interesting to the municipalities. The environment doesn't generate votes, it doesn't generate jobs like the mine does. This has been a clash with the *Junta.* There is one municipality that supports our environmental work, or at least doesn't oppose what we are trying to do, but it's too far away and has too little political clout to really do anything; to convince anyone else. They couldn't even make it to this meeting because of the distance. They feel far away from everything. We don't really have a contaminated river to unite us, as was the case for JIRA."

Edmundo's comments pointed to one of the fundamental challenges facing JISOC that JIRA never experienced. JIRA came about because of the interests of the municipalities themselves, and in response to a specific environmental crisis. It was, for all intents and purposes a bottom-up grassroots creation that addressed a collective need. On the other hand, JISOC was imposed upon the municipalities by the state and federal government and external funders, without any clear environmental "crisis" to speak of. In fact, the municipalities often spoke of jobs and public services (water, sanitation, etc.) as their primary focus. Never before had the municipalities had to work together and never before had they been told to prioritise environmental issues, particularly by non-voting entities. And all this was occurring in a region where territorial limits mattered, both thematically and physically.

Moreover, JIRA's own Citizen Council has been an essential part of its own success. Without citizen participation, Arellano and Rivera (2011) argue that JIRA's objectives would have never been achieved. Part of the purpose of decentralised governance is to transfer power towards actors or institutions that are responsible for their territories and populations (Ribot 2004). In Mexico, the municipality is the local governing body that is responsible for territories and populations. However, in 2013 and at the time of writing this article, it did not fully involve the citizenry. Additionally, the process of decentralising environmental governance in Mexico appears more like deconcentration where power is devolved from the central to the local, but responsibility continues from above, as the events from August through October demonstrate.

In mid August, the Board of Directors convened a meeting with JISOC staff to review several items, including the contract of the Director, Carmen. Her contract had only been written for one year, with the possibility of renewal, given a positive review by the Board. An ominous sign that something was awry was that all of the municipal presidents arrived themselves when in previous meetings they had sent a representative. Clearly, this was a meeting they did not want to miss. Furthermore, LAIF staff who would often attend the meetings and act as intermediaries between the municipalities and JISOC staff did not attend either. I found out after the fact that LAIF and the federal CONAFOR representative had visited with three municipal presidents in the weeks leading up to the meeting to plead with them to let the director continue her job and to see JISOC not as an enemy, but as an ally. They anticipated that the meeting would result in her termination.

The meeting began as most meetings did, with a quick review of the agenda items by the president of the board, Yesenia. When she arrived at the point of discussing Carmen's contract renewal she stated that she spoke for everyone when she said that she was not happy with Carmen's work. Carmen responded that her work needed to be evaluated, and that from the evaluation a decision can be made, but that she could not be dismissed without a formal evaluation. However, Yesenia argued that it wasn't possible and that there was no time, so Carmen was to be terminated immediately. There was a lot of banter and arguing back and forth, until the President of Mascota, who was not a PRI member, stood up and stated unequivocally, "It's better if we keep this money ourselves." Another president stated, "There are two positions, that of "you" and that of "us" and "us" refers to the municipal presidents and we are unified in this position." When it came time to vote, all the municipal presidents voted in favor of termination, and only the university representative and the state SEMADET representative voted against it. Neither the state representative for CONAFOR nor the Secretary of Rural development voted, and the representative from the federal CONAFOR agency remained silent the entire meeting. The final vote tally was 7-2 in favor of termination, with 2 abstentions. At one point I looked over at Yesenia and noticed that she was trembling.

As we were leaving the meeting, the president from Guachinango, who was one of two municipalities from an opposing political party, approached Carmen and told her, "I'm so sorry, you know that I didn't want to do this but if I didn't show solidarity with the other municipalities, I could lose everything." The president of Talpa also said, "You know, it's all a question of politics. Here's a hug for you to keep going forward" and he leaned in to give her a quick hug of support. Despite the circumstances, it seemed that he wasn't exactly in agreement with what happened either.

With Carmen gone, according to JISOC's legal framework, the president of the Board would become the interim director until a new director could be found. This meant that Yesenia who led the charge to fire Carmen, was now the Director, giving the Board had complete control over firing and hiring all remaining staff as well as the 2 million peso budget. Furthermore, as long as she remainedInterim Director, it also gave the Board, largely comprised of PRIistas, total control over the formation of the Citizen Council. Given that the PRI was the party in power at both the state and federal levels, this potentially gave the party a direct line to earn votes for the next election. In other words, without an already existing Citizen Council, the PRI could use this and the work of JISOC as a mechanism to potentially earn votes in the region. Six months following Carmen's termination, the Board hired a new director, who was openly a friend and former employee of Yesenia. They also replaced the Accountant with another

former employee of a PRIista municipality and the Project Coordinator with the former employee of the president of Mascota. Although it is entirely possible that these individuals were the most qualified for the job, my interviews with those involved indicated that it was not likely. With regards to the Citizen Council, at the time of writing this article, it hasyet to be established. It's unclear why this is the case, althoughthe absenceof the Council means that the balance of power within the *Junta* is still tipped toward the municipal presidents. Several weeks following this rather dramatic turn of events, I asked the university representative to the Board, who voted in favor of retaining Carmen as the director, what he thought about the meeting. "Democracy in Mexico is still very young," he told me. "This seems to be all about political control, unfortunately, and less about protecting the environment. JISOC needs time to grow and the municipalities need time to grow with it." (Interview 2013).

As it happens, the legal framework of JISOC that allowed the municipalities to monopolise the power of the Board and to undermine the democratic process was based on the example of JIRA. However, in JIRA's case, the circumstances of its creation were entirely different and the relationship among municipalities was one of cooperation, rather than one of competition. In a recent forum on environmental governance in Mexico, a university representative from JIRA stated the importance of strengthening the legal frameworks of the Juntas in order to overcome the political limitations that exist within Mexico (Del Castillo 2017). Citing the challenge of achieving a functioning board, he suggested that more capacity building and greater civil society participation was paramount for the Juntas to realise their potential for conservation management (Del Castillo 2017). Although citizen participation and the presence of civil society will not automatically make the process of governing more democratic, local participation is an important feature of decentralised environmental governance (Larson 2002).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As the above vignettes demonstrate, the economic and political marginalisation of the municipalities in the region combined with a weak legal framework makes the municipalities, and thus JISOC, susceptible to political party power. The fact that the municipalities have an opportunity to undermine the work of the *Junta* by means of firing the director and placing the Board president, who is also a municipal president, in the director position, poses a significant threat to democratic decision-making and environmental management. Moreover, without a strong civil society presence that can potentially provide a counterweight to the power held over the Junta by the municipality, the *Junta* runs the risk of merely providing a mechanism to deconcentrate, or administratively decentralise political power through the local municipalities. Although the municipal authorities that dominate JISOC's governing board are elected leaders, the interest in that region at that time was in maintaining political power rather than in instituting REDD+-related activities or any environment-related activities. As a result, the two non-PRI municipalities had very little decision-making power in the end. Such an exercise of power resembles the clientelism and patronage networks characteristic of the former authoritarian regime.

At the same time, although the impacts of the deconcentration of political power on the specific programs that JISOC oversees remained to be seen, anecdotally, all of the programs that had been developed in the first year vanished. This includes the community-based forest monitoring program that they helped facilitate and the agrochemical recycling initiative. As the forest conservation programs that most consider being part of a more traditional REDD+ initiative are still governed by CONAFOR, the deconcentration of power had little effect on these programs. However, JISOC's ability to work toward a broader goal of environmental conservation within an inter-municipal region was certainly eroded.

Furthermore, despite the plurality of political parties at the municipal level, it is the political party of the state, in this case, the PRI, that is significant for the operations of the *Junta*. With the PRI in power in the national and state government and a local PRI-ista at the helm of the financing and the Board, other municipalities, regardless of their party affiliation, were at the mercy of the politically powerful municipality. Acting in defiance to the Mayor of this municipality and the president of the board would have put the other municipalities capacity to govern at risk. Consequently, this political arrangement and the management of the *Junta* provide evidence for the PRI's efforts to re-locate and re-centralise their political power through the municipality.

One of the significant challenges to countering such forms of elite capture is the lack of financial and institutional capacities to implement effective environmental governance. As Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) make clear, for environmental governance to be successfully decentralised, there must also be a wiliness and ability on the part of government officials to share power and financial resources. In the case of JISOC, the lack of such willingness and ability leaves municipalities like Mixtlan and Guachinango dependent upon the state and decisions of the other municipalities. Because of this, municipalities are interested in the funding available for JISOC but less so in the environmental goals of the project. As the quote from the Guachinango's municipal president demonstrates, they find themselves in situations where they must demonstrate political solidarity so as not to suffer political and economic consequences. Indeed, and as the Municipal president from Mascota stated, their interest was in utilising the funding from the *Junta* as they saw fit—which was not for conservation. Furthermore, given that the process of forming JISOC was imposed from the top-down, the municipal presidents had very little buy-in to the goals of the *Junta* and did not see themselves as part of it, but rather as being in competition with it for limited resources. In other words, if REDD+ financing did not exist, *neither JISOC nor the other new Juntas would exist*.

Furthermore, the municipalities received no demand from their electorate, so they were free to determine political

agendas and priorities as they saw fit, which meant that the conservation goals of JISOC were not a priority. And as Larson and Soto (2008) argue and this case illustrates, authorities are far more likely to take-up environmental governance issues if local citizens demand it and if they have both the financial and institutional capacity to do so. Yet in the case of JISOC, no such demand on the part of citizens exists.

Although the voices of some of the actors involved with JISOC are included in this study, a clear limitation is the inability to provide additional voices. Moreover, JISOC is just one of several *Juntas* being implemented throughout the REDD+ early action areas. Although there is anecdotal evidence that at least one other *Junta* experienced a similar hijacking by municipal interests, it is difficult to generalise the current study to other *Juntas*, particularly given that the social, economic, and even political realities differ greatly within Mexico. However, the international literature on REDD+ and governance also documents cases where local participation and support for democratic institution building are lacking (e.g. Chomba 2018; Nuesiri 2018). Furthermore, as the purpose of case study research is to provide in-depth analysis of a particular phenomenon, it is important to note that the historical context and the lingering existence of patronage networks are not unique to the Sierra Occidental alone.

Similar to the beginning months of JISOC, several months after the signing of the legal framework for the new Inter-municipal Junta in Quintana Roo (AMUSUR), municipal elections brought about administrative changes and uncertainty about whether or not the goals of the Junta would be implemented (Rantala et al. 2014). According to Rantala et al. (2014), a source close to one of the member municipal governments suspected that contributions from municipal budgets to a trust fund under the *Junta*, the principal means for channeling REDD+ funds to the local level, would be complicated in the overall difficult financial situation, despite being mandated by the framework. As the authors suggest, "the AMUSUR experience will indeed be a test of how the lines of accountability and representation play out in efforts to coincide the idea of inter-municipal "territories" promoted by CONAFOR and foreign donors with existing jurisdictional structures, i.e., a democratically elected local government with a legal mandate to define its own priorities. Furthermore, the perceived disconnect between the municipalities and communities raises concerns about vertical coordination under the inter-municipal model" (Rantala et al. 2014: 3160).

In the case of the two new *Juntas* in the Yucatan peninsula, while the explicit desire for democratic, civil society participation exists, the reproduction of clientelism and the strong influence of authoritarian centralism present significant obstacles to this participation (Rantala et al. 2014; Libert Amico and Trench 2016). As a consequence, the newly founded *Juntas,* as I have shown in the case of JISOC, find an environment controlled by political parties and a lack of initiative to address environmental issues. To date, the success of the *Juntas* is limited by the desires of external actors and funding agencies, the lack of civil society participation and local accountability, and centrist political party power. As such, the formation of the Inter-municipal *Juntas* is an example of decentralisation that results in nothing more than deconcentration of political power, whereby the majority of actors in the organisation are upwardly accountable.

In other words, the ongoing dependency of the municipal governments upon federal funding and political party allegiances, combined with the power of political parties limits the capacity to respond and eliminate corruption at the local scale.Without adequate counter-weights that include citizen participation to combat political interests, the *Juntas* are doomed to fail. As other authors have shown, ignoring the legacies of national politics in conservation programs ends up reinforcing already existing power inequities thereby undermining the potential for local democratisation and environmental governance (Sundberg 2006). Conservation efforts must include forms of governance that foster democratic social relations if they are to be successful.

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NOTES

1. Marginalisation is considered to be a lack of social opportunities and the lack of capacity to acquire or generate them, as well as the inaccessibility to basic goods and service. It is measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Very Low Marginality" and 5 being "Very High Marginality" (CONAPO 2013).
2. The Exchange rate of MXN to USD was roughly 14 MXN to 1 USD at this time.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

1. ADF: French Development Agency
2. AECID: Spanish International Cooperation for Development Agency
3. AMUSUR: Municipal Association for the Environment of Quintana Roo
4. CONAFOR: National Forestry Commission
5. JIRA: Inter-municipal Junta of the Environment for the Integrated Management of the Lower Aquila River Watershed
6. JISOC: Junta Inter-municipal de la Sierra Occidental y la Costa Norte
7. LAIF: Latin American Investment Fund
8. PRI: Revolutionary Institutional Party
9. REDD+: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Plus
10. SEDER: State Secretary of Rural Development
11. SEMADET: State Secretary of the Environment and Territorial Development
12. SEMARNAT: National Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources